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A Look at the CIA

PRESIDENT Kennedy is losing no time, in the wake of the humiliating Cuban debacle, to learn what happened to our vaunted Central Intelligence Agency. He has called upon Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, former Army chief of staff and Atty. Gen. Robert Kennedy to look into the activities of the agency and also into the capabilities of the nation in fields short of formal warfare.

This, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch points out, is a matter of the greatest urgency. The CIA helped to organize, train and finance and arm the Cuban refugees who undertook the ill-starred invasion of their country.

Many rebels accuse the agency of inexcusable mismanagement. They say it precipitated the attack without adequate coordination with the Cuban underground and without including groups experienced in guerrilla tactics. The whole operation was based on the false assumption that a popular uprising against Fidel Castro would follow the landings.

In short, the CIA failed, and Mr. Kennedy fully realizes the urgent necessity of finding out why. An unreliable intelligence agency is worse than none at all, and the public record of the CIA is not good. It may be that the unreported successes of the hush-hush agency more than balance the failures, but these have been too many known failures and too much known bungling. Mr. Kennedy is to be commended for making it plain he is not seeking a scapegoat. Nevertheless, the security of the nation is involved and it is the President's duty to protect it.

This question might not have arisen at all if Congress had accepted the proposal made more than five years ago by Sen. Mansfield of Montana and 32 other senators. This was for a joint watchdog committee to supervise the operation of the CIA much as the joint committee on atomic energy supervises the activities of the Atomic Energy Commission.

Such a committee might, over a period of time, bring about a new definition of the duties of the CIA. Allen Dulles, its director, has always maintained that the CIA "is not a

policy-making agency; we furnish intelligence to assist in the formulation of policy." But charges have become more frequent in the last few years that the CIA has been departing from this role and competing with the State and Defense Departments in the implementation of policies its intelligence estimates suggest.

It appears to have the statutory authority for this. It was created in 1947 to exercise broad functions in the intelligence field, but was also given authority to perform "additional services" and "other functions" under the direction of the National Security Council. The gathering of intelligence and the conduct of subversive activities are two separate things. We need and must have an intelligence agency. It should be the world's best. There may be a question as to whether the United States should have an agency ready to undertake a job like that the CIA attempted in Cuba. If, for self-protection, this must be done, then that agency cannot fail.

The problem that has not been solved, and which President Kennedy told the American Society of Newspaper Editors he was studying, was phrased this way recently by James Reston of The New York Times:

"How an open, non-conspiratorial society, with a free press that is skeptical of secret government activities and power, can compete effectively with a secret and conspiratorial society using all the instruments of subversion without having to answer its own public opinion."

This is a question that cannot very well be threshed out in public debate. But it is, in a field in which a congressional committee would be useful. Appropriations for the CIA are concealed but the agency reportedly spends as much as a billion dollars a year; it is said to employ 12,000 to 18,000 persons. Such an agency should be subject to a greater degree of supervision by the elected representatives of the people.

This would not be for the purpose of embarrassing the CIA but to help it follow better the imperatives of national policy. Certainly nothing like the Cuban debacle must happen again.